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## **Children's participation in decision-making in Slovene kindergarten schools**

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### **Abstract**

*Children's participation / involvement in life of kindergarten and making decisions about things that concern them - is a key feature of citizenship education in early childhood. Children can be active members of their institutions and can contribute in meaningful ways. Slovene kindergartens are organized as day-care. Therefore, it is important for teachers to ask themselves if children have enough opportunities to create their institutional life. A study has been made to investigate level of decision-making among children and teachers in kindergarten. According to teachers, levels of decision-making are mostly low. Children participation is limited to planning daily activities; teachers' power is limited to implementation of curriculum. Hardly any have influence on classroom environment. Teachers also don't influence team meetings.*

### **Introduction**

Children's participation – their involvement in creating their life in kindergarten and making decisions about things that concern them - is a key feature of citizenship education in early childhood. Children are already citizens of their societies; they can be active members of their institutions and can contribute in meaningful ways. Therefore, early childhood pedagogy should not focus primarily on preparing children for future citizenship in adult life. Moreover, teachers in kindergarten should provide children with experiences of participation 'here and now'. The concept of participation means being involved in planning every day activities, belonging to the group and feeling included when resolving problems. It also means decision-making: being consulted, exerting significant influence on important issues concerning one's life and cooperating with adults in changing the world.

Involvement and decision-making are two central concepts of citizenship education in early years. First, children need opportunities to express their needs and expectations inside kindergarten, to contribute to the life in a classroom with their ideas and to be involved in participatory learning strategies. This condition fulfilled, the concept of citizenship education can 'move further', towards learning how to improve the 'outdoor' world. Education for citizenship always involves experiences 'here and now'. Even though the competences learned in childhood are important for adult citizenship, they can merely be regarded as a 'positive side effect' of early citizenship education and not its primary goal.

Democratic pedagogy requires changes in teachers' values and beliefs. The traditional conceptualisation comprehends childhood as a state of immaturity, incompetence and inability to understand the world. Therefore, adults are fully responsible for children

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since they know best what is good for them; it is generally assumed that they will always act in the best interests of children. The *ethics of participation* (Hoffman, 1994) and *strength perspective* (Saleebey, 1992) indicate a post-modern shift towards shared responsibility. The ethics of participation obligates professionals to renounce power over the 'truths' and final answers, i.e. the power that does not belong to them. Instead, they should *create* opportunities for dialog in order to find joint solutions. The *strength perspective* emphasises that professionals should mobilise people's strengths, talents, abilities and personal resources in pursuing their own personal goals and visions.

Not many research works have been conducted on children's participation, especially with children under school age. Pramling Samuelsson (2004) claims that 'it seems as though researchers think that children must be close to becoming adults in order to be allowed to be heard and to express their perspectives' (p, 4). Most research studies, as well as practices connected with children's rights, have been done in Nordic countries from the early 1990's. Other initiatives in European countries followed the path (for more see Clark, Kjørholt and Moss, 2005).

Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) found out that participation in decision-making is of vital importance for children in Swedish kindergartens. Interviews with children revealed that they were allowed to decide about their personal belongings, their own play and activities, and to some extent make decisions about themselves. Nevertheless, children's decision-making did not exceed the activities they initiated themselves.

In Slovenia a retrospective study was conducted of children's memories and experiences in one early childhood cooperative (Kranjc, Radovan, 1998). The cooperative was established as an alternative to 'regular' public kindergarten with strong a philosophy of children's and parents' participation.<sup>1</sup> The researchers interviewed children two years after they left the cooperative. The study showed that 'having the opportunity to decide about things' was a crucial factor in children's evaluation of their kindergarten experiences. The description of children's involvement formed a major part of memories of their kindergarten experiences. In addition, the decision-making was an important part of group identification. Children from the cooperative said they felt 'privileged' compared with the other children since they 'had no strict schedule to follow' and 'discussed issues at adult-children assemblies'.

Other fields of research in early childhood indicate that children's participation is not a strong feature of the internal culture of preschool services. The comparative survey observing preschool settings in 17 countries (Weikart, Olmsted and Montie, 2003) offers indirect conclusions about children's participation. It shows that in most preschool settings there prevails not only adult-centred interactions and negative behaviour-management approaches but also a lack of adult listening behaviour. In this sort of context children's participation and involvement seems unlikely to be promoted. In

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<sup>1</sup> The cooperative was founded in 1991 as a welfare-mix organisation serving parents who wanted to participate fully in children's education within the institution. Parents of preschool children took the initiative to rent the public kindergarten facilities and took turns as 'part-time teachers' of their own and other participants' children. In addition, one professional teacher was employed full-time.

Slovenian kindergartens the highest proportion of positive behaviour-management practices were observed.

In the 90s, two qualitative studies (De Batistič, 1990, Bahovec and Kodelja, 1995) drew attention to non-democratic elements in kindergarten's hidden curriculum (see Apple and King, Jackson). By comparing teachers' practices with their argumentations, M. De Batistič (1996) estimates that in Slovene kindergartens children's needs are generally met quite satisfactorily, while particular needs and expectations of an individual child are rarely taken into account. She found out that the learning activities were structured and pre-planned almost entirely by adults. Poor level of individualisation of everyday routines was also estimated. In some kindergartens the internal ideology of 'everyone doing the same at the same time' was identified (Bahovec and Kodelja, 1995), allowing few opportunities for children to 'escape' from the collective-oriented routines and express what they really wanted.

## Method

### *The problem and research questions*

Slovene public kindergartens are organised as day-care centres; children spend eight to nine hours per day in institutional care. Therefore, it is important for teachers to consider whether children are given enough opportunities to create their institutional life and make decisions about issues that are important for their well being. Compared with many European early childhood institutions, the Slovene kindergartens are highly accessible; they provide quality living standards, nutrition and health care. We believe that children in Slovene kindergartens tend to be very well 'taken care of', though rarely consulted on the subject of their expectations, ideas and wishes. It seems that the 'provision' and 'protection' aspect of early childhood are guaranteed. However, it is not clear to what extent the children's right to participate is exercised, such as it is defined in article 12 of *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989).

The Slovene early childhood curriculum (*Kurikulum za vrtnice*, 1999), adopted within the context of independent state and democratic political system, strongly emphasises the 'philosophy' of making choices and respecting differences. It requires from the teachers to provide a variety of learning opportunities, contents and materials in order to strengthen the children's right to choose (pp, 8 – 12). We believe the notion of children's participation is not based merely on concepts of *variety/plurality* and *freedom of choice*. The participation concept involves providing the children with opportunities to *create* their own choices and make decisions about the *important issues* regarding their life in kindergarten.

Our study conducted in Slovene kindergartens (Turnšek, 2005) aimed at investigating the perceived level of decision-making among children in kindergarten. We asked teachers to estimate how *much influence children exert* in different areas of decision-making. Since previous research works indicate that children's decision-making in kindergarten is limited to the contexts of children's own play and activities (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001), our study focused on more 'demanding' areas of decision-making indicating higher levels of participation. We have focused on children's

participation in shaping their own environment, influencing the conditions for learning and play as well as on planning the curriculum activities.

### **Research questions**

The study aimed to assess:

- To what extent children influence decisions in particular areas of decision-making and,
- What are the factors related to the decision-making (are teachers' professional characteristics such as degree of education and pedagogical experience important factors in decision-making, what is the role of subjective factors such as teachers' work satisfaction and satisfaction with the choice of profession, does the size of preschool setting play an important part, what is the role of local community factors).

### **Variables**

Dependent variables for children's decision-making are: *influence on...*

- *Purchasing toys and materials,*
- *Furnishing and decorating preschool classrooms,*
- *Organization and content of celebrations and other events,*
- *Choosing their 'own teacher' and activity and*
- *Planning daily activities.*

**Table 1: Independent variable list**

Variable name	Range
Teachers' level of education	Secondary education - the teachers' training college 2-year higher education program for early childhood teachers 3-year undergraduate vocational program of early childhood education
teachers' pedagogical experience	From 1 year to 35 years working in kindergarten
teachers' age	From 24 to 56 years
Teacher's work satisfaction	From 1 = not at all satisfied to 10 = very satisfied.
Teacher's satisfaction with the occupation	I would choose to be a preschool teacher again I would probably choose another profession I would definitely choose another profession.
Size of kindergarten	From 6 teachers to 55 teachers employed in kindergarten
National region	N = 5
Type of community	Urban, semi-urban

The second dependent variable is the *overall level of decision-making* which represents the individual sums of respondents' estimations on all the areas of decision-making. Independent variables are described in table 1.

### ***The sample, data gathering and processing***

The study began in 2002 with a pilot questionnaire on a democratic set of values, beliefs and preferences; the questionnaire also contained variables on children's decision-making (Kroflič et al, 2002).<sup>2</sup> After we got the response from the teachers, we randomly selected 16 kindergartens from all major Slovene regions (five). All the respondents employed in selected kindergartens as 'early childhood teachers' completed the questionnaire, altogether 422. Data processing and analysing (descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, t-test, F-test) was done by the author.

Two thirds of the teachers (61.4%) completed secondary education, another third (34.9%) finished one of the faculty programs (23% of teachers completed a two year higher education program for early childhood teachers, 6.4% completed a three year undergraduate vocational program of early childhood education). The average age of teachers is 42 years, whereas their average teaching experience is 20.4 years. The majority of the teachers (67.5%) reported to be very satisfied at work (values 10, 9 and 8), 6.4% were not at all satisfied (values 1, 2 and 3) and the rest (23%) reported moderate work satisfaction.

## **Results**

### ***Children's influence on decisions***

Teachers were asked to *estimate to what extent the children exert influence on decisions in kindergarten*. They indicated the levels of decision-making on a Leikart scale. (see Table 2)

According to the teachers' estimations, the children's participation in decision-making in kindergarten is mostly low. In three of five areas of decision-making the percentage of those having *no influence* or *very little influence* is about 85% or more. Only about two percent of children exert *strong* or *crucial* influence on deciding which toys and materials should be bought and how their classroom should be furnished or decorated. The same proportion of children are given the opportunity to choose their own teacher or activity. (In some kindergartens different curriculum activities are prepared on the level of institution, so children are given the opportunity to choose among teachers initiating those activities.).

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<sup>2</sup> Variables on children's and teachers perceived impact on decisions are one dimension of the general questionnaire on teachers' democratic values, beliefs and preferences (Kroflič et al, 2002). The questionnaire was conceptualised at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana by the team of teachers from Department for Preschool Education.

**Table 2:** *Children's levels of decision-making in Slovene kindergartens*

Children's influence on:		No influence	Very little influence	Some influence	Strong influence	Crucial influence	n.a.
purchasing toys and didactic materials	N	266	103	31	8	1	13
	%	63.03	24.41	7.35	1.90	0.24	3.08
furnishing and decorating preschool classrooms	N	259	102	36	10	2	13
	%	61.37	24.17	8.53	2.37	0.47	3.08
deciding about the organisation and content of celebrations/events	N	82	104	151	57	20	8
	%	19.43	24.64	35.78	13.51	4.74	1.90
choosing their 'own teacher' and activity	N	275	103	22	3	6	13
	%	65.17	24.41	5.21	0.71	1.42	3.08
planning daily activities in day-care centre.	n	18	49	176	124	44	11
	%	4.27	11.61	41.71	29.38	10.43	2.61

The levels of decision-making are higher in areas concerning the curriculum implementation. According to two fifths of teachers, the children exert *strong* or *crucial* influence on the planning of the daily curriculum. About one fifth of teachers claim that children can contribute ideas regarding the ways of celebrations (e.g. birthdays, mothers' day) and other important kindergarten events (table 2).

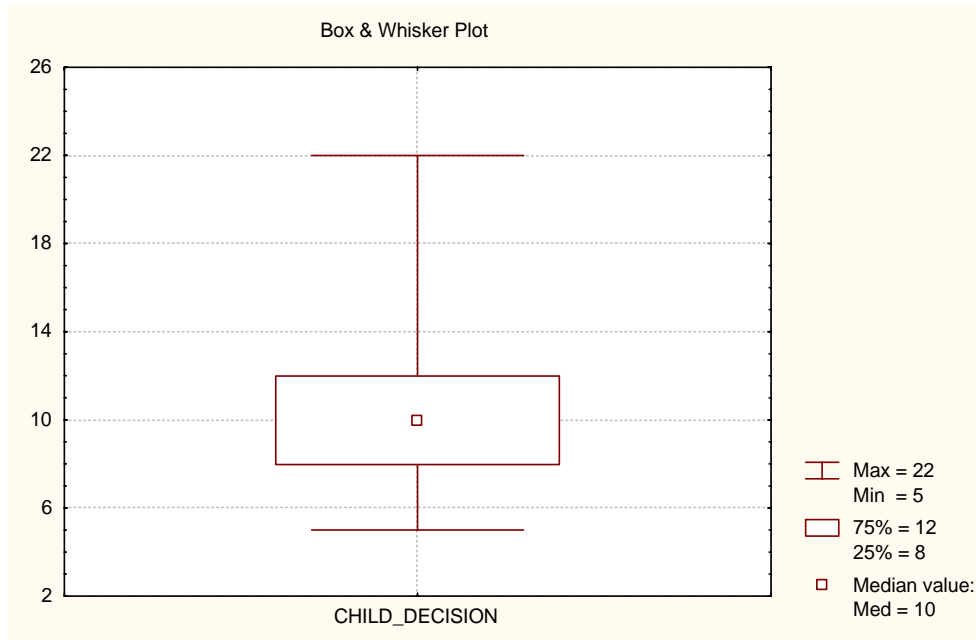
#### ***Children's overall level of decision-making***

The median value for children's overall level of decision-making is 10.3 and the standard deviation value is 2.9.

**Table 3: Children's overall level of the decision-making, frequency table**

Values	Count	Cumul. Count	Percent of Valid	Cumul % of Valid
0 - 5	12	12	3.0	3.0
6 - 10	220	232	55.1	58.1
11 - 15	146	378	36.6	94.7
16 - 20	20	398	5.0	99.7
21 - 25	1	399	0.3	100.0
Missing	23	422	5.8	

Table 3 shows that extreme values are rare; only 5.3 % of respondents estimate children's decision-making as very high and 3 % of them as extremely low.

**Graph 1: Children's overall level of the decision-making, Box and Whisker Plot**

Graph 1 shows that the values range from 5 to 22. One half of the respondents estimate children's decision-making in value range between values 8 and 12.

#### *Factors of children's overall level of the decision-making*

##### *Teachers' professional characteristics*

**Table 4: Children's overall level of the decision-making according to years of teachers' working experience**

Years of working in kindergarten	Means	N	Std. Dev.
0 - 5 years	9.4	16	2.7
6 - 15 years	9.5	58	2.5
16 - 25 years	10.3	250	2.7
26 or more years	11.2	66	3.6
All	10.3	390	2.9

The children's overall level of decision-making increases with the teachers' working experience in kindergarten ( $F = 4, 460, p = 0, 00430$ ) (table 4). Teachers with more working experience tend to estimate children's decision-making higher. Levene's test of homogeneity of variance is 0.033, which means that the assumption of equal group variances fails. In that case Brown-Forsythe's test is more accurate; it confirms that the



differences among teachers with different lengths of working experience are indeed significant.

The differences among the teachers' age groups are not significant ( $F = 1,019$ ,  $p = 0,384$ ) which confirm the sole impact of the variable working experience.

The children's overall level of decision-making is not connected with the teachers' level (and degree) of formal education. The most educated group of teachers report higher levels of children's participation than the other two groups, but the differences are not significant ( $F = 1.976$ ,  $p = 0.1400$ ).

#### *Subjective factors*

The children's decision-making shows no significant connection with the teachers' satisfaction. Both the 'extreme groups', the teachers who are extremely satisfied at work and those who are the least satisfied, estimate children's overall level of decision-making higher than those 'in between'. But the differences are not significant ( $F = 1.228$ ,  $p = 0.2938$ ). Another variable follows a similar pattern: the teachers who are most satisfied with the choice of profession and those the most dissatisfied tend to estimate children's decision-making higher. Again, the differences are not significant ( $F = 0.7584$ ,  $p = 0.4691$ ).

#### *Local community factors*

**Table 5: Children's overall level of the decision-making in five Slovenian regions**

Region No.	Means	N	Std. Dev.
Region 1	10.5	85	2.8
Region 2	9.6	90	2.5
Region 3	10.9	112	3.1
Region 4	9.8	49	2.9
Region 5	10.3	63	2.9
All	10.3	399	2.9

In five Slovenian regions, we observed significant variations regarding the children's levels of decision-making ( $F = 2.924$ ,  $p = 0.021001$ ) (table 5). The assumption of equal group variances is accepted since Levene's test of homogeneity of variance is not significant ( $p = 0.7998$ ).

However, there is no difference in children's decision-making between kindergartens located in urban areas, i.e. in larger cities and those in semi-urban communities ( $t$ -value = 1.188  $p = 0.2764$ ).

*Institutional factors*

The study confirmed important significant variations in children's decision-making among 16 Slovene kindergartens ( $F = 2.9426$ ,  $p = 0.0002$ ). Levene's test of homogeneity of variance is not significant ( $p = 0.2152$ ). The mean value of children's overall level of decision-making varies from 13.4 to 9.4, standard deviations values varies from 2.2 to 4.1.

**Table 6: Children's overall level of the decision-making according to the number of teachers in kindergarten**

No. of teachers	Means	N	Std. Dev.
1 - 10 teachers	10.3	12	3.3
11 - 20 teachers	11.5	65	3.5
21 - 30 teachers	10.4	122	2.8
31 - 40 teachers	9.6	100	2.6
41 teachers or more	10.1	100	2.6
All	10.3	399	2.9

The children's opportunities for decision-making are also strongly connected to the size of the kindergarten, i.e. with the number of teachers ( $F = 4.589$ ,  $p = 0.0012$ ). The teachers who work in small kindergartens with eleven to 20 teachers report the strongest children's impact on decisions, however not those working in the smallest setting. The teachers employed in larger institutions, particularly those with 31 to 55 teachers report less children's influence on decisions (table 6).

*Predictors of children's overall level of the decision-making*

**Table 7: Regression Summary for dependent variable children's overall level of decision-making**

	BETA	St. Err. of BETA	B	St. Err. of B	t(369)	p-level
Intercept			4.503	4.735	.95	.342
Work_Satisf	-.095	.053	-.125	.069	-1.81	.072
Prof_Satisf	.008	.052	.023	.141	.16	.873
Age_Teach	.132	.124	.064	.060	1.06	.289
<b>Years_In Kinderg</b>	<b>.307</b>	<b>.124</b>	<b>.136</b>	<b>.055</b>	<b>2.48</b>	<b>.014</b>
Educat_Level	.094	.055	.367	.215	1.71	.088
Kindergarten	-.089	.057	-.057	.037	-1.55	.121
Region	.054	.058	.115	.124	.93	.351
Urban_Semi Urban	-.013	.057	-.071	.325	-.22	.827
<b>Employee_Numb</b>	<b>-.163</b>	<b>.058</b>	<b>-.034</b>	<b>.012</b>	<b>-2.83</b>	<b>.005</b>

The multiple regression analysis confirmed that the size of a particular preschool setting and the length of teachers' pedagogical practice are the two most important predictors of

children's decision making ( $R = 0,2605$ ,  $R_c = 0,0679$ , Adjusted  $R_c = 0,0451$ ,  $F(9,369) = 2,985$ ,  $p < 0,00191$ , std. error of estimate = 2,78).

### **Conclusions with Discussion**

First, we need to point out that the research findings show only the subjectively perceived level of decision-making, not the observed one. However, we believe that even the subjective perceptions of power or powerlessness have an impact on people's behaviour. We assumed that the teacher's assessments are based on their own experiences and perceptions of children's participatory opportunities in 'their' group of children and in other groups in a particular early childhood setting. Therefore, even perceived decision-making can serve as an indicator of kindergarten democratic ethos.

The survey shows that the level of children's participation in decision-making in Slovene kindergarten is limited to issues concerning the curriculum implementation, while children are mostly excluded from managing the classroom environment. The majority of children have at least some voice in planning everyday life activities and events. At the same time, the majority of children are rarely asked what toys should be bought for the group, how to organise the environment and which activity they would prefer to attend. In other words: they are responsible only for 'inside matters'. As we initially assumed, children's participation in shaping their own environment and influencing the conditions for learning and play is low. The findings are similar to those from Swedish kindergarten, showing that 'children seldom participate in and influence the overall organisation, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers' (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001, p, 188).

The children's involvement in decision-making is clearly an important (vital?) part of the 'internal culture' of a particular kindergarten. The notable variations among kindergartens and teachers working in different regions indicate that the internal culture reflects the prevailing values of the (local) community. Langsted (1994) emphasises that it is the cultural climate which shapes the ideas that the adults in a particular society hold about children; the wish to listen to and involve children originates in this cultural climate. However, it is the teachers, teacher-assistants and headmasters who shape the internal culture. We assumed that teachers who feel satisfied at work in a particular workplace tend to accept children as partners more willingly than those who are dissatisfied. But our assumption that work satisfaction being an important part of the institutional ethos plays an important role in providing children with participation opportunities was not confirmed.

The size of the kindergarten is a crucial factor in shaping one's institutional life. Smaller settings (but not too small) offer good conditions for children to participate. Teaching experiences are the second crucial factor of the children's participation. It seems that with more years of working in kindergarten teachers feel more confident to create situations for children to express their ideas, wishes and suggestions. We assumed that university education would contribute to either higher estimations of children's decision-making or perhaps more critical standpoints. However, our findings show that the level of teachers' formal education and training has no impact on the children's decision-

making estimations. Our next step is to explore the role of the teacher's decision-making in the work place as a factor of children's decision-making.

We are concluding with a thought that kindergartens should be places where preschool children feel part of a classroom community, stir up lively discussions on how they should spend the day, learn to negotiate with others and respect each other's opinions. Our study suggests that the tradition of 'intentional pedagogy' is still well preserved. Many teachers think they have to 'make the day' for children in kindergarten, therefore they see their role mostly in relation to the planning *for* children rather than *with* them. But the potential for change is present. In a recent survey more than one half of Slovene teachers claim that increasing children's participation is the most important change needed to improve the quality of Slovene kindergartens in the future (Turnšek, 2005).

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